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# Wildfire Management: Hotshot Crews

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## Interagency Hotshot Crews

Wildfires can be unpredictable, with the severity and direction of the wildfire changing in a matter of moments. To ensure the safety and protection of life and property, response to a wildfire requires an array of resources including air and ground support.<sup>1</sup> This report briefly discusses the role of hotshot crews for wildfire management.

Hotshot crews are intensively trained fire crews that are generally placed in the most rugged terrain on the most active and difficult areas of a wildfire. The primary mission of an Interagency Hotshot Crew (IHC) is to provide a safe, professional, mobile and highly skilled hand crew for all phases of fire management and incident operations.<sup>2</sup> A crew typically consists of 20 members that have excelled at a variety of standards for IHC operations including physical fitness, operational preparedness training, and field exercises, and has a particular wildfire management experience level. General activities for an IHC may include fire line construction, fuel removal, and burnout operations, among other tasks. The crew may be deployed to any state where they are needed. The National Interagency Coordination Center (NICC) is the overarching federal agency charged with deployment of a crew.<sup>3</sup>

There are 110 Interagency Hotshot Crews, with the Forest Service being the federal agency with the largest number of crews (67).<sup>4</sup> The Bureau of Land Management, the Bureau of Indian Affairs, and the National Park Service also have Interagency Hotshot Crews. There are a small number of crews that are nonfederal, including crews operated by states and local governments. All crews, federal and nonfederal, must meet the standard for interagency hotshot crew operations and be certified in order to be recognized as an IHC.<sup>5</sup> As of July 1, 2013, the National Interagency Fire Center (NIFC) reports that 53 crews are working on incidents.<sup>6</sup>

Similar to other wildfire management strategies, there are some concerns about IHCs including funding, oversight, and performance monitoring. The FS reports that funding for federal Interagency Hotshot Crews is allocated to the regions from the National Office of Fire and Aviation Management.<sup>7</sup> The Department of Interior reports that funding for Interagency Hotshot Crews is drawn from the preparedness program.<sup>8</sup> IHC positions can be seasonal temporary positions, posing some to question the type of personnel benefits (e.g., health care, retirement) these employees may receive.<sup>9</sup> There is an Interagency Hotshot Crew Steering Committee that tracks national and geographic IHC statistics.

<sup>1</sup> For more information see CRS Report RL30755, *Forest Fire/Wildfire Protection*, by Kelsi Bracmort.

<sup>2</sup> Department of the Interior, Department of Agriculture, *Standards for Interagency Hotshot Crew Operations*, February 14, 2011.

<sup>3</sup> The NICC is the focal point for coordinating the mobilization of resources for wildland fire and other incidents throughout the United States.

<sup>4</sup> Conversation with Kari Boyd-Peak at NIFC on July 1, 2013. A list of National Interagency Hotshot Crews is available at [http://www.fs.fed.us/fire/people/hotshots/IHC\\_index.html](http://www.fs.fed.us/fire/people/hotshots/IHC_index.html)

<sup>5</sup> Department of the Interior, Department of Agriculture, *Standards for Interagency Hotshot Crew Operations*, February 14, 2011.

<sup>6</sup> Conversation with Kari Boyd-Peak at NIFC on July 1, 2013. The National Interagency Fire Center is located in Boise, Idaho and is the logistical and support center for U.S. wildland firefighting.

<sup>7</sup> E-mail from FS, May 8, 2013.

<sup>8</sup> U.S. Department of the Interior, *Budget Justifications and Performance Information Fiscal Year 2014*, 2013.

<sup>9</sup> The Obama Administration directed OPM to provide health benefits for federal hotshots in 2012. Office of Personnel Management, "Federal Employee Health Benefits Program Coverage for Certain Firefighters," 77 *Federal Register* 139, July 19, 2012.

## Yarnell Hill Fire

Wildfires can be dangerous, even for well-trained individuals. The tragic loss on June 30, 2013, of 19 firefighters—members of the Granite Mountain Interagency Hotshot Crew assigned to the Yarnell Hill fire—is a reminder of the danger trained individuals face when trying to manage wildfires. The Granite Mountain IHC is not a federally sponsored crew, but rather is sponsored by the City of Prescott, Arizona’s Fire Department. The fire, which was started by lightning on June 28, 2013, in Yarnell, Arizona, has reportedly encompassed more than 8,000 acres. Thus far, the fire has been limited to state and private lands.<sup>10</sup> The federal government is providing suppression crews and aviation support, and has also replaced the local Incident Management Team (IMT) with a federal IMT.<sup>11</sup> The Federal Emergency Management Agency also approved a Fire Management Assistance Grant (FMAG) for the Yarnell Hill Fire.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> The Prescott National Forest is approximately 35 miles north of the town of Yarnell.

<sup>11</sup> E-mail from NIFC July 1, 2013. For more information on federal assistance, see CRS Report R41858, *Federal Assistance for Wildfire Response and Recovery*, by Kelsi Bracmort.

<sup>12</sup> FEMA-5032-FM-AZ. FEMA, “Arizona to receive FEMA funding for deadly Yarnell Hill Fire in Yavapai County,” press release, July 1, 2013.